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ABSTRACT

The problems facing modern languages in comprehensive schools in Great Britain are discussed. Questions raised by the situations are: why do fewer pupils in the fourth form and even fewer sixth formers study a language? Why do even fewer choose to continue with their language studies when they progress into higher education? Phases in school reorganization that have influenced modern language study include: (1) the common core curriculum in the lower forms; (2) the system of options operating in the fourth form; (3) transfer between schools; (4) the place of second foreign language in the curriculum; and (5) examination systems. The most significant feature resulting from the adoption of the common core curriculum in secondary schools is that the introduction of a second foreign language in the lower forms has become generally impossible. Easier options for students than taking foreign languages result in children escaping the study of a language in their third year. When heads of schools do not offer second languages with small enrollments, the unfortunate consequence is that the minority languages die out, or are taught in small pockets of resistance. Examination systems have revealed that students have gained a wide variety of experience in their early levels. It is projected that the only language that will be widely taught in secondary schools in the 1980s will be French. (SW)

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MODERN LANGUAGES IN COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOLS: FEARS AND HOPES IN GREAT BRITAIN

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It was probably to state the obvious to say, some ten years ago, that any fundamental reorganisation in the domain of secondary schooling was bound to have far-reaching consequences. It was, notwithstanding, almost certainly not within the power of any observer of the educational scene, however acute, to foresee that comprehensivisation was to have particular effect on language provision in ways that would have appeared unthinkable, even in moods of pessimism. In the context of Northern Ireland, it is probably to state the less obvious, however, to say that language provision in Great Britain has gradually given rise to what is now considerable anxiety. For the concern which is generally expressed about the future, even lack of future, which seems to lie in store quite unavoidably for the majority of languages as taught in Comprehensive Schools is proof and token of the general pessimism which now clouds the whole issue on the national level.

The debate which has centred around the demise of these languages and which grows still in vigour (of which we, however, perceive but distant echoes), was provoked, it would seem, by the Burstall report of 1974, *Primary French in the Balance*. The problem—and all its attendant complications— has since been the occasion for numerous conferences; it has been lengthily, sometimes angrily, aired in both the specialist journals and the popular press; it has become and continues, with even greater frequency, to be the object of all manner of specialist working parties in different parts of the country. The apprehension which these various forms of activity would seem clearly to express was, moreover, to receive a large measure of official recognition earlier last year in two H.M.I. reports: *Mathematics, Science and Modern Languages in Maintained Schools in England* and *Modern Languages in Comprehensive Schools.*

It would be misleading, however, to dwell upon the heated and growing criticism which has been directed at the state of languages in the schools. For it could well foster the belief that apprehension is confined to the secondary sector alone. This is not so—a problem compounded (as we shall see) by lower attainment on the part of prospective undergraduates—has caused concern to spread to those involved in language teaching at all levels and in all regions. The concern is, in fact, henceforth so general that there is, or there is believed to be, "a crisis in modern languages". Most certainly the cries of alarm and even distress which have been made in this respect have tended, with increasingly noticeable regularity, to express the problem in precisely such, or broadly similar, terms. One such cry which I have noticed, and which I reproduce for its exemplary value, ran as follows:

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

> "The study of French and other modern languages is entering a phase so critical that its survival in its present form is seriously threatened" (Prof. C.A. Burns, President, Soc. for French Studies, April, 1976)

Even Oxford University, one month later, in its annual report, warned that it was expecting "considerable problems" in the teaching of classical, oriental and some modern languages. In many honours schools, it went on, "the need for elementary instruction in languages is increasing. This arises, in part, from the decline in the teaching in schools of the classical languages and the trend towards a reduction to one in the number of modern languages taught. It is still unclear, the report continues, whether proposals, currently under discussion, concerning the school examination system and syllabuses will result in a further deterioration of the position or not".

These are, turn by turn, (and one could multiply the statements for effect, since the sources are legion), stern and despondent words. But do these words, which have a particularly ominous ring for any linguist, correspond to reality? More importantly, do they provide an assessment of reality to which one can subscribe with a minimum of reservations? Or, conversely, are we dealing with one of those periodic and contagious bouts of scaremongering which has accompanied comprehensivisation on its way? The short answer to these questions—I give it as one who has followed the debate with some persistence and with, I hope, that slightly increased objectivity which distance lends—would seem to be that the situation is indeed as preoccupying as people claim.

To pose the problem in its most explicit terms, we may say that the questions raised by these situations are: Why do fewer pupils in the fourth form and even fewer sixth formers, study a language? Why do even fewer again choose to continue with their language studies when they progress into higher education?

This is, however, only the first of the two propositions latent within the problem. As will become reasonably apparent, it is by no means the most significant. Underlying the quantitative framework within which the debate began initially to find definition, there was soon found to be a vaster area of more fundamental qualitative considerations which have, it is claimed, wider and more serious implications for the future. To be precise, many people envisage the future which awaits the languages as being a downward spiral. The latter maintain that even among those students who do devote themselves to the study of languages at a higher level, there is a fall in standard ..... with the result that the quality of graduate language teachers is lowered ..... with the further consequence that schoolchildren in turn are less stimulated by languages ..... with the ultimate closing of the cycle when therefore fewer pupils again proceed to language study at intermediate and higher level.

One can sympathise with the first term of the problem, as with the general despondency which one must immediately associate with such a cycle of thought, though it is not entirely impossible to lose patience with such ruthlessly contrived reasoning which is rather less helpful than it ought to be. This criticism should not, however, serve to obscure the fact that there is, and will continue to be, for the foreseeable future, widespread concern in the minds of many at what is felt to be a serious and ironically quite inopportune crisis in language teaching in British comprehensives.

Let us turn our attention, however, to the essentials; let us invoke that slightly increased objectivity which distance lends, and let us ask how the crisis came about? What its salient features are? and, more precisely, what can be done about it? But in so doing let us deliberately shun, from the outset, the more fanciful explanations, the politically or socially loaded arguments, the sweeping moral and intellectual condemnations of today's youth and let us attempt to identify that small number of reasons which deserve mention and which are more likely to hold, if not the, then at least an explanation of the present challenging situation. Having sifted the available hypotheses and suspicions, we are left with the following fundamentals:

(i) the reorganisation of secondary education, along with the corresponding influence that such re-organisation (and its accompanying administrative procedures ..... or lack of them, as the case may be) is having on language provision.

(ii) training in teaching techniques is lagging some distance behind practice and present practical needs.

(iii) the accelerating shortage of appropriately trained teachers because of, inter alia, the global cutback in teacher training numbers

The above items have strong claims to our attention. These claims are, however, of unequal weight. And it would not be unfair to suggest that the last two—though important in the influence that they are exerting at the present—are merely contributory or exacerbating features: I mean by this that they were not in or of themselves responsible for the situation, though they certainly do nothing to alleviate it. It is hence evident that, of the three, we must examine the first as closely as space permits.

It would perhaps be helpful in the first instance— if we are to attend to the influence that school reorganisation has had on the well-being and expectancy of modern language study—if I were to tabulate the disparate reactions of colleagues in secondary schools and to examine them in a purely chronological fashion in an endeavour to show how we are dealing, in effect, with the chronological phases of an on-going problem. Suitably re-arranged, these phases would be: the common core curriculum in the lower forms; the system of options operating in the fourth

form; transfer between schools; the place of second foreign languages in the curriculum; and last, but by no means the proverbially least, examination systems. In my forthcoming examination of these various inter-related and inter-reacting factors, I shall adopt a system of description which, to some, may seem too schematic to permit an entirely faithful reflection of the complex current situation. My response to such objections, would be that we are dealing in effect, not with one single, uniform situation, but with a wide variety of broadly similar situations which, from school to school, are in greater or lesser measure combinations and permutations of all or most of the individual components which may be said to constitute the essential national problem. On the contrary, far from distorting the matter, a schematic presentation of its components serves not only to sharpen the focus for effectiveness (and even impact) but also to provide a surer means of understanding and appreciating whichever individual case may command our attention.

I would therefore, having deliberately adopted such a position, make the following brief comments on each factor:

i. Common core curriculum: without a doubt the most significant feature resulting from the adoption of the common core curriculum in secondary schools is that the introduction of a second foreign language in the lower forms has become generally impossible. With one foreign language alone finding its place in the curriculum at this level, the tendency in almost every case has been to give pride of place to French. To ask why, (not out of idle curiosity, but for fundamental pedagogical reasons), would indeed be a very well-chosen question, since the long-term implications and ramifications that such a choice has within the framework of language provision as a whole cannot be underestimated. But a brief answer, based on working experience, would obviously stress the time-honoured habit of teaching French as the first language in secondary schools, with its attendant consequence that teaching staff and teaching resources are therefore readily available.

A further consideration to bear in mind is that the introduction of primary school French has on the whole strengthened and not weakened—as had been hoped and predicted ten years ago—the predominance of French over all other languages. We would see clearly why this should transpire if we were to examine the case of those few schools which decided to offer German or Spanish as their first foreign language: they have found or are finding their position increasingly vulnerable in face of demands for continuity with their feeder schools, where French may already have been taught for as many as three years.

In fine, the dice are abundantly loaded in favour of French for all manner of reasons (see also *iv. second foreign languages*)

ii. System of options: we can alas! deal quickly with the system of options. If only because, as linguists with an intimate knowledge of the demands which the study of language makes, we ought to know intuitively what is going to happen inside the heads of many incoming fourth year pupils who find themselves in a system where the compulsory study of French (or of any other modern foreign language for that matter) ceases suddenly to be so. It is then that hostility to languages and the well-documented "third year syndrome" come into their own; and undeniably, the initial problem of the hostility to languages is not helped by the presence within the available curriculum of a wide range of what, in the lure of schoolchildren, are apparently "easier" options.

The "third year syndrome" is undoubtedly one which prompts children to escape from the study of a language. But, in fairness, we must add that such decisions are not exclusively, even if they often are, ruled by emotive considerations: the fact that languages suffer from not having a powerful vocational appeal must also be considered as a factor in its own right.

Emotive considerations of two sorts it would appear, stemming immediately from the classroom, are nevertheless of particular significance: languages, and very particularly French, suffer in their teaching in the common core from being taught necessarily in large-size classes, often in a mixed-ability environment. This would seem in practical terms, and given the working conditions generally obtaining within the lower forms of the majority of today's comprehensives, a prime recipe for losing children to a language and not retaining them.

The second closely-allied consideration, which must however take a full share of blame, revolves around the delicate matter of staff morale and commitment. Such a question, naturally enough, is not one that can or should normally be open to generalisation. But morale among most language teachers (and I have corroborated the contention from a variety of personal sources) is unquestionably at a low ebb. (The reader is invited to reflect not only on the following paragraph, but also on the cumulative implications of sections iii, iv, and v).

One cannot, in all honesty, believe that the remarkably indifferent teaching that H.M. Inspectors recently found in greater proportions than ever before can be ascribed to anything else. In the ultimate analysis, it is truly dedicated and enthusiastic teacher who will not allow all the worries presently associated with financial restraint and stringency, teacher/pupil ratios, waning interest in all languages on all fronts, near extinction of others ..... to impinge upon the thrust of his own teaching.

We can fully understand the present climate of despondency, however, only if we define it with more precise reference to the historical background from which it emerged; that historical background—which is remarkable for the cumulative

pressures which it came to exercise – is by no means confined to the period which saw the gradual reorganisation of secondary education. It dates back in effect to the early 1960s', and even predates therefore the wholesale introduction of comprehensive education itself. The years in question were already a time of rapid and profound change in language pedagogy, characterised in the main by the move away from the comparatively comfortable patterns of classroom teaching towards the infinitely more complex, and certainly more demanding, areas of individual learning. They saw the move away from grammar-based courses, through the audio-visual and the audio-lingual, into the whole ability range with its attendant problems: problems presented by motivation, by discipline and by the inadequacy apparent in the methods and materials to hand; with its problems of administration, organisation and curriculum; with its lack of clearly defined ultimate objectives.

There lies outlined above, in those few lines, problematic material enough to occupy the mind of any teacher for the space of a whole career ..... many linguists, however, often unguided and often quite inadequately armed, have moved through the whole spectrum in a short space of time, becoming more and more disorientated and less and less sure of their mission.

Need we, at this stage, seriously ask whether there might not be a direct relationship between teacher despondency and the "third year syndrome"? But, unfortunately, the question of morale is ubiquitous. It is also to be recognised in the problems arising from:

iii. Transfer from one school to another: in a subject as demanding in its learning as modern languages, it is self-evident that the learning programme must be as structured and as continuous as is possible. It has, however, been found that in the transfer of pupils from one school to another (e.g. from a lower to a middle school) lack of continuity, both in content and method, creates serious difficulties for teacher and taught alike, with the morale of both standing in direct line of the consequences.

It was found, again by H.M. Inspectors, that there are numerous examples of the "use of different courses and materials in parallel lower schools, and even more instances of disparate teaching methods with differing priorities". There was even found to be, incredible though it may seem from every sane point of view, "great variety in the organisation of modern language teaching as adopted by individual schools within any group of lower schools (i.e. 9–13 years and 11–14 years) contributing to the same upper school".

Rather than give vent, however, to expressions of utter disbelief at the possible damage that such autonomy can do, we would do perhaps better to state more simply that, in the system of options (which we have already mentioned), the second foreign language – if it is, in fact, taught – usually begins

at this point, immediately on transfer! Needless to say, if the study of the first foreign language has been, for whatever reason, an unsatisfactory experience, the pupil's motivation may well be irreparably undermined. And certainly experience has shown that success in learning the first foreign language provides motivation for beginning the second.

iv. Second foreign languages: there is at this juncture, for various reasons which should henceforth be not overly difficult to discern, a shortfall of pupils in second foreign languages, including German. Hence, when such an option is taken up, the resultant classes tend to be small, or certainly far smaller than is good for the well-being of the subject. This may, in turn, exert and often has exerted other negative pressures which may lead (but which in documented instances have led) to the abandonment of the languages in question. Otherwise put, there is safety in sheer numbers: as a generalisation, we may say that small classes are not popular with Heads of schools, and that small comprehensives in turn have little time or money to spare for second languages which are considered an expensive luxury and which have quite literally disappeared from the syllabus.

Heads of schools again, to be more specific, tend to be wary of offering second languages which, because of their small following, do not make sense when seen from the angle of cost effectiveness; which, because of their small following, are particularly hard to defend in the apportionment of scarce resources. It happens also that Headteachers dislike offering second languages which are dependent upon the ability and continuing availability of one lone teacher. Because should the teacher in question leave, the Head can find himself under uncomfortable pressures, generated by considerations of cost-effectiveness, to re-allocate the post—irrespective of the disruption caused to pupils in mid-course—in a subject where classes are unwieldly. Such over-large classes could easily be in French ..... with the consequent strengthening of that language at the expense of the weaker. And such strengthening, which seems to be happening with some frequency, is widely felt to be quite undesirable. It is, hence, of very particular significance to draw attention to the fact that the interplay, within the curriculum, between French and other modern languages—studied with reference to the difficulties experienced by these second languages—is an important feature of the dynamics of the present situations.

Obviously, the unfortunate consequence of such situations is that the minority languages in question die out, or are taught at best in small pockets of resistance. A further unwelcome consequence is that undergraduates or graduates in these languages (which the internal logic of the problem must ultimately make an ever dwindling band) are, or will increasingly become, reluctant to train as teachers in these languages, in the belief either that jobs will simply not be available for them

or that the jobs, should they materialise, will hardly offer anything other than trial, tribulation and disappointment.

We ought to finish this sad litany by adding that the requirements for language teaching are, in some schools, increasingly at variance with the demands made by other subjects. Thus, when the time comes for options, available option groupings can create difficulties for modern languages, particularly for the second, so-called minority, modern languages. And of particular concern are the various problems (time tabling, staffing, motivation, morale, recruitment, etc.) facing Spanish, Italian and Russian which in many schools, it appears, are being phased out altogether or are in a position so insecure that their phasing-out tomorrow is a definite possibility.

v. *Examination systems:* comprehensive teachers in Great Britain have seen in the recent years a proliferation of examination systems which, not in themselves, but in their practice, suggest a lack of realism and which ultimately lead, in their disparity, to almost insuperable teaching problems in upper schools and sixth form colleges. Given that the feeder schools seem to be completely autonomous, and answerable only to themselves, the upper schools and sixth form colleges have somehow to come to terms with, and accommodate, the wide variety of experience that their pupils have gained at the earlier, feeder stage. And they are therefore faced with the unenviable chore of making up work and of co-ordinating different levels of achievement if public examination standard is to be attained in the short time at their disposal.

It is at this stage that motivation can once more be seriously affected. Although this is more particularly the case with regard to the intake, from various backgrounds, into sixth form colleges where the pupils show considerable variation in ability and attainment. In short, the gap between fifth and sixth forms is now, for many pupils, more immense than it has ever been before. The whole unfortunate situation is rendered all the more delicate in that there is little time (now only five terms, since the date of A level has been brought forward) for teachers to get to know their charges, to diagnose their weakness and to make them good, and to capitalise on their strengths. It is rendered all the more delicate again by the fact that, even at this level, less time than ever before, in terms of contact hours, is timetabled for the languages despite the fact that, on the contrary, extra time is absolutely essential if some of the more glaring weaknesses are to be remedied.

Much blame for the unsatisfactory state of affairs in both fourth and sixth forms must be attributed to there being little effective liaison between feeder schools and upper schools/sixth form colleges. When continuity of content, method and materials would seem to be so essential for a successful on-going language course, one can hardly credit the findings of H.M. Inspectors who reported that "in only four of the nineteen sixth-form colleges studied had effective

liaison been established through a combination of regular meetings, visits, exchanges of staff or the transmission of adequate information. There was only one example of agreement on the materials to be used and on the balance of emphasis within the course. In half the schools, contact was infrequent and of very limited value, and one quarter of the schools had no links of any sort".

All the above problems (common core curriculum; system of options; transfer from one school to another; second foreign languages; examination systems; financial restraints; timetabling problems; morale) are the problems which one encounters in the situation presently obtaining, which act and react in various combinations and in various guises, and which, should their rate of unhealthy onward progression not be arrested and they themselves eradicated, will lead in the 1980s to a situation in which virtually the only language widely taught in secondary schools will be French. All the other languages (with the possible exception of German) will be taught in higher education, *ab initio*.

When it is freely stated, with all the solemnity of an act of faith, that national and economic necessity must needs ensure that every citizen is educated to his true potential, it can but seem ironic that the pool of ability in languages in Great Britain has been seen, can even be seen quite unmistakeably, to be dwindling.

I hesitate to say, because I am not entirely sure that I believe, that for all this damage a certain type of educational and pedagogical system must take the blame. Because the degree to which some of the problems, which have followed in the wake of reorganisation, might prove to be purely transitory (precisely how pernicious, for example, is the present financial stringency?) is an unknown factor. But whatever the exact truth on that score may transpire one day to be, one can surely claim that, for a lot of the present unhappy circumstances, a certain lack of planning, and of imagination, and of co-ordination, must invite censure.

Censure on our part—however strong the temptation to apply it—would nevertheless be an essentially misplaced exercise, and all the more so since it would come after the event which the "culprit" is seeking to remedy. In short, attempts at reversing the situation are presently gaining momentum. Among the more noteworthy, one may enumerate the following:

> various groups of professional people at all levels are turning their attention towards the present problem and are co-ordinating their respective efforts in defining responses and strategies (e.g. King's College colloquium held in November, 1976).
>
> there have been and there are at the moment a number of working parties in existence in various circles and various agencies (Sussex, Nottingham etc.) ... not excluding the highest.

there is now much closer and more active liaison between all branches and all levels of education among themselves, and also with the Inspectorate and the D.E.S.

the N. and F. proposals only recently put forward by the Modern Languages Syllabus Steering Group could, if adopted, do much to alleviate the situation.

There is, in short, an awareness as never before that the whole fabric of language studies in Great Britain is undergoing, or rather has already undergone in great measure, a fundamental transformation. From the present vantage point it should be fairly evident that many of the results and side effects of the transformational process were not, nor perhaps could ever be, envisaged when it was put into operation. And therefore the time-lag is reacting positively to the problematic, even highly worrying, issues which have arisen–one does not, for example, view the demise of all the foreign languages apart from French with any equanimity–is not a matter of surprise, even less for condemnation. It is more important, and more encouraging, to report that a positive reaction has come about, which came about in time and which has provoked, as it continues to provoke, some of the most positive and stimulating thinking on the whole spectrum of modern language provision that has ever been seen.

But one must not be duped by such cerebral activity, however frequent nor however impressive. Nor must one mistake promise for performance. For the moment that is the only comment that one can decently apply to the present state of reparative activity in modern languages. Theorising within working parties, whatever its intellectual value, is pointless in the present situation of desparate need for concrete solutions unless one is able to co-ordinate and translate theories into effective practice. The alternative is, I hope, unlikely. For that alternative does seem to be an unpleasant prospect.

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